The Moral Imperative of the TRC and the Question of Collective Guilt

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1 Introduction

We all condemned our parents to shame, even if the only charge we could bring was that after 1945 they had tolerated the perpetrators in their midst.1

The collective guilt of the German people is a recurrent theme in post-World War II literature. It would not be an exaggeration to describe the question of collective guilt as a national obsession among ‘second generation’ Germans, the direct descendants of the generation who lived through World War II. Surprisingly, the question of the collective guilt of white South Africans has not received adequate scholarly attention. In light of the substantial amount of literature on the South African political and legal transition this fact is both surprising and remarkable.2

The question of whether collective guilt can be attributed to white South Africans, specifically Afrikaners, is both emotive and intriguing. The idea of collective guilt is inherently controversial. One reason for its contentious nature is that guilt is strongly associated with criminal guilt or with wrongdoing. It is however integral to the idea of collective guilt that guilt can be felt even by those who did not commit any wrongs. Scholars as diverse as Hannah Arendt and Daniel Goldhagen have resisted the generalisation inherent in the idea of collectivising guilt as well as the implications of holding an entire people guilty.

Yet the idea of collective guilt holds great popular appeal. Many attribute guilt to Americans for slavery, to Germans for the Holocaust, Europeans for colonialism and white South Africans, and specifically Afrikaners for Apartheid.

The question of collective guilt fits into the discipline of Transitional Justice. As a self-conscious emotion, guilt is closely related to shame. Emotions such as guilt and shame have implications for social processes in political transitions from authoritarian rule to democracy and for the ways in which we deal with and remember past collective crimes. The establishment of Truth Commissions has been one mechanism of examining collective ways of dealing with negative historical events. Whereas the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) did much to create awareness of the acts of individual perpetrators in South Africa, the limited mandate of the TRC did not allow it to adequately address the question of the collective guilt of white South Africans. I will argue that this had important consequences for the lack of guilt many white South Africans feel.

This article will examine the question of whether the TRC attributed or engaged with the notion of collective guilt at all. Much has been said about the TRC’s quasi-religious and moral (istic) nature. Posel comments that the TRC’s mandate of accessing truth was ‘deeply moral.’ Gutmann and Thompson go as far as to argue that Truth Commissions should be moral in its justification and foundations. The TRC was headed by a cleric, Desmond Tutu, who often resorted to religious language. The TRC’s hearings were opened with prayer. And through its human rights committee and Amnesty committees, offered confession and absolution.

It will be argued that the final report of the TRC mostly ignored the notion of collective guilt. When, in volume 5, the Report briefly refers to the idea of guilt, it fails to construct a notion of guilt that is comparable to the more sophisticated and nuanced notion of guilt that occupied German authors such as Karl Jaspers. It will be argued that the fact that the TRC, because of its focus on the individual, did not realistically reflect or encourage feelings of collective guilt in South Africa.

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3 Guilt forms part of a package of restorative transitional justice measures. The package includes guilt, atonement and reparation.

